

# A PHILOSOPHICAL INSIGHT INTO 21ST CENTURY FEMINISM: NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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## Abstract

*Feminism is a fluid and complex concept. It is even more complex in this century. Think of the issue of transgender and all the gender notions. Just like every other 'ism', it is embedded in all sorts of conceptual jargons; liberalism, sexism, radicalism, emancipation, equality, patriarchy, misogyny, etc. It means different things to different people of different times across different cultures and different languages. It often connotes gender war. This paper investigates 21<sup>st</sup> century feminism in Nigerian context from the point of view of philosophy. Its locus cogitandi is to give a philosophical insight into the concept of feminism with focus on the elucidation of its identity, vision and mission, while it questions the particular condition of women in Nigerian context. Philosophy that serves the people should be pragmatic and contextualized. This paper questions whether feminism is still relevant in our time and especially in Nigeria. Although it acknowledges that feminism has helped to achieve much especially with regard to women empowerment and consequent contributions to development at various spheres, it recommends that there is a dire need to properly address the issue of feminism for there is still poor participation of women in political affairs, leadership and public services. But on the other hand, there is a more cogent need to deal with the more complex matters arising from even the achievements of the feminist movement as bits of dangerous alliance between career and motherhood continue to manifest. Some of our women who could not successfully combine their professional carriers and motherhood failed their families. This has very devastating ecological consequences. For example, divorce and consequent single parenting is on the steep increase with its devastating effects on the children and the society at large.*

**Keywords:** Philosophical insight, 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Feminism, Nigeria.

## Introduction

The noble and sacred duty of philosophy towards feminism is rooted in its general role. Philosophy has both universal and humanistic characters. As a universal discipline and life-wire of civilization, philosophy directly enquires into the phenomena of life, while it concerns itself with the basic questions and problems confronting man and his existence and the environment in which he lives. As a humanistic discipline, it guides man and offers him the necessary prescriptions to cope with the challenges of life and existence. Azenabor captures this well when he noted,

Philosophy is humanism... It humanises... It serves humanity. It is relevant to human condition, life and existence...In this respect humanistic philosophy has been referred to as 'human-beingism' Development does not

have to be technological- it can also be cultural, intellectual and even moral...Philosophy is important in the process of raising human personality to the highest level, which it is capable of attaining, developing all that is finest and noble in it and turning out first class human beings. It follows that without some tincture of philosophy a man is an imperfect human being.

Philosophy of Feminism has its “central concern for gender and some commitment to justice for women”. To the question of the role of philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century feminism, I therefore consider it as being able to harmonize theory and praxis, solve issues of the moment especially existential issues that debase human dignity. In fact, it should seriously assume a logotherapeutic role. Feminist movement corresponds to the ways and life of given peoples and the changing ideology of each generation. As Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda rightly noted, “**actions will only bear fruit when we know ourselves and what we need and then articulate our visions clearly**”. Culture is dynamic. Philosophy that serves the people should be pragmatic and contextualized. It should be able to concern itself with the analysis of philosophical concepts in relation to feminism by re-examining the meaning, significance and impacts of feminism. Before we delve more extensively into this role, it is important to elucidate the ground on which philosophy discusses feminism.

### **Feminism Understood**

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, feminism is understood to be “the approach to social life, philosophy and ethics that commits itself to correcting biases leading to the subordination of women or the disparagement of women's particular experience.” It is an umbrella concept that is generally viewed as a clarion call for social, political, and economic equality between the sexes. Sometimes, it encapsulates fight for men's right as well. Philips and Cree consider feminism as campaign for women's right to vote, hold public offices, work, earn fair salaries, have equal pay, eliminate gender gap, own properties, be educated, have equal marriage right within marriage. For Bell, “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression.” Mama refers to feminism as an “ongoing struggle to free women from centuries of oppression, exploitation and marginalization in all the vast majority of known human societies. It is also a call to end patriarchy and to expose, deconstruct and eradicate all the myriads of personal, social economic and political practices, habits and assumptions that sustain gender inequality and injustice around the world.” Issue with women is a complex one, even more complex than those of men; anatomically, psychologically, even in dressing, and in relationship. Feminism was born out of perception of patriarchal dominance in many cultures including Nigeria. Women feel being maltreated by the males and aim at equal rights and protection. It questions the general and particular conditions of women. The ugly familial, political, social, Religious, educational trends of torture, degradation, violence against women elicit in them questions about the dignity of their human worth and existence in relation to that of men. As such, they yearn for justice, equal respect and treatment. “The main goal of feminism is to disturb the system of relations that have deprived women and favoured men for centuries...it hopes to recognize and assert the full equality and humanity of female and male in every society.” Feminist movement has earned debate tag in various fields of discussion including philosophy. Incidentally, many are advertently or inadvertently involved in issues that connect feminism either in its defence or in

rejection of it. Thus, it divides scholars into pro- and anti-feminism. Until the birth of feminist wave, women have been subjected to male dominance, domesticated and deprived of public appearances, roles and privileges. This is often attributed to bio-social reasons whereby various cultures assign specific roles to each gender due their anatomical distinctions.

So far, feminism connotes radicalism and many other negative notions. Gender issue is a dialectical one, like mind-body issue. Seeking for sameness and remaining different is a sensitive, intricate, complex, multifaceted and even tension-gripped issue. It produces tension, social, psychological, emotional unrest, etc. and general existential anxiety. It may be referred to Kierkegaard's concept of freedom as sympathetic antipathy and antipathetic sympathy, that is, freedom with responsibility and anxiety.

The notion of feminism has provoked the echo of many feminine voices. Sanger, an American feminist asserts that “the true test of a woman's freedom is not her ability to earn her living but her ability to control pregnancy and birth.” Hence, “no woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother.” At the very beginning of the first chapter of her 2<sup>nd</sup> volume of *The Second Sex (Deuxième Sexe)*, Simone de Beauvoir contends that “one is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman.” She argues that formative stages and processes of socialization condition women to accept weak, passive and dependency nature. Wollstonecraft's work on *Vindication of Rights of Women* which was considered as the manifesto of the rights of women acknowledged that men are biologically superior to women but at the same time, it delineated education of women as a significant factor that enhances the intellectual ability of women and aids them to rise to equal *niveau* with their male counterparts. Betty Frieda, the American feminist who observed that many American house wives suffer what she termed 'mysterious sense of emptiness' due to domestic violence which they are unable to explain instigated revolutionary acts in them by creating awareness in them to seek for freedom and actualize themselves through education. *In a Different Voice*, the psychologist Carol Gilligan through her confrontational research of gender biased study of Kohlbergian moral development revealed that certain virtues may be manly or womanly. Women virtues include caring and bonding. With her personal experience, the African writer Chimamanda acknowledging biological sex differences argued that women should be empowered to have equal access and place in political, economic and public spheres. Considering culture as a product of man, she declared that “we shall all be feminist.”

### **Assumptions of Feminism**

The feminist movements principally assume that both creation and salvation were not complete without a woman. How can full development be attained without a woman? Are men wiser than God? (cf. Gen, 2:23). Then with a woman, life in the Garden was not merely a simple relationship but an effective communion and union. Yet, “this world has always belonged to males.” Practical examples include:

### **Women Perceived as Weaker Sex, More Emotional Less Rational and Less Intelligent**

Feminism generally assumes that women are often referred to as weaker sex and almost every inferior actions and events is considered *woman-like*. For example, in Shakespearean Hamlet the actor used 'woman metaphor' to describe the action of his mother, Queen Gertrude whose

character he considered as frail and weak for her singular act of hastening into marriage with his uncle Claudius shortly after the death of her husband. So he expressed, “Heaven and earth, must I remember? Why, she would hang on him as if, increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on, and yet, within a month- let me not think on it. Frailty- thy name is woman!”

### **The Goal and Objectives of Feminism**

The themes for the most recent successive years on the International Women's Day (IWD, 8<sup>th</sup> March) are good pointers to the goal of feminism.

IWD 2019- “Think equal, build smart, innovate for change.”

IWD 2020- 'Each for Equal'.

IWD 2021- “Choose to Challenge. A challenged world is an alert world and from challenge comes change. So, let's choose to challenge.”

The major goal of feminism can be said to be promotion of social justice. It has but not limited to the following objectives:

1. To promote social justice by eliminating all forms of discrimination against women in the interest of humanity.
2. To avail women equal treatment and opportunity to perform and contribute to their individual development and that of the society at large.
3. To generally weaken socio-cultural beliefs, practices and rigid gender norms that create and encourage gender inequality, marginalize women and impede on their self-fulfilment.
4. To empower women through education and otherwise to enhance their understanding of the society and be properly introduced into the wider world in order to contribute to its development.
5. To aid women to be gainfully employed, gain financial security, sentence hunger, violence, abuse, etc.
6. To promote healthy behaviours and to live without fear of coercion and violence.
7. To manage and control their destiny, be happily married and feel fulfilled.
8. To enhance economic independence of women and associated factors towards financial security that increase women's power and reduce domineering, abusive and possessive behaviours towards them in order to negotiate safe practices in their marital and sexual relationships and resist domestic violence.
9. To close the threatening gap occasioned among all by educational, economic, political and religious imbalances in the exercise of choice and decision making in breaking cycles of patriarchal mentality and attitude towards the subordination of women and resultant effects of harmful cultural norms.

The goal of feminism will take us also to a little bit of its history and theoretical framework. It is self-evident that men and women came from the same creative source and they are all created equal as rational human beings but endowed with unique anatomical features. Hybrid of roles not actually catching up with men, is expected.

### Types and Epochs of Feminism

Feminism has developed over the years through various forms and shapes, namely; traditional feminism (attack on men's patriarchy), liberal feminism (struggle for equal rights for men and women), radical feminism (challenge of the patriarchal oppression of women), Marxist feminism (strive for equal pay for equal labour), cultural feminism (advocacy that a world ruled by women will be kinder), etc. However, the central feature of feminism is gender vis-à-vis women issues with regard to gender equality. Feminist movements have also recognized various waves:

**First Wave-** This was the earliest known feminist movement famously referred to as *Seneca Falls Convention* of 1848 led by Elizabeth Cady. This 2-day event held in New York launched a freedom movement and created a global vision for women with regard to challenging and changing perceived unfavourable norms. It centrally discussed social, civil political and religious rights of women which earned them the right to elective franchise (suffrage) after about 72 years of deliberations. It is more politically inclined in their cry for suffrage and property rights.

**Second Wave-** The second wave of feminism occurred in early 1960s through early 1980s in USA. It was peculiarly known for having campaigned for liberation of women, greater equality of women with their male counterpart, anti-discrimination. Again, more of personal rights were sought such as freedom of sexual expressions, helping the voiceless, for example, in child marriage (cf. Gloria Steinem, Dorothy Pittman Hughes, Betty Friedan). This period owed its inspiration to the 1949 work of Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

**Third Wave-** This was the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist movement that primarily advocated for women's right to decision-making concerning their own lives with regard to reproductive rights, control of misogyny (disrespect and oppression of women through abusive words and actions), etc.

**Fourth Wave-** This particular wave was said to be digitally-driven. It started in 20<sup>th</sup> century when the use of technologies and social media heightened. They were employed to encourage women to display ill practices against them and give voice to such harsh realities. Also, women empowerment featured very well at this period and endured till date.

### Philosophy and Feminism

Philosophy addresses the issue of feminism. This work considers only two theses presented here.

1. John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women*, 1861

Not only women champion the course of right of women. Men also do. To curb subordination of women in order to create a more humane and better society with sustainable development, Mill advanced the course of equality among sexes. The 19<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher who refined Bentham's Utilitarianism and laid much emphasis on the primacy of individual freedom and self-determination called for legal and social equality for women through his *Subjection of Women*, 1861. His position in arguing for equality between the two sexes was a very clear confrontation to European conventional norms with regard to the status of men and

women of his time. According to him, subordination of women is wrong in itself and at the same time clogs the wheel of development by almost half the population. In his words, “the legal subordination of one sex to another is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a system of perfect equality, admitting no power and privilege on the one side nor disability on the other.” His core reasons for women emancipation are based on utilitarianism, economy and good of the society. Thus,

- The traditional prejudice against women as being weak, emotional, docile, etc. do not permit their benefits to play out.
- No proof to support the claim for superiority of physical strength of men over those of women- arguments are based on mere physiological speculations without concrete evidences.
- Women should be allowed to perform so to know their nature that has been so wrapped up by men.
- Predicament of women equals those of slaves- “there remains no legal slaves save the mistress of every house.” (cf. slavish obedience- Mary Wollstonecraft, 1792).
- The progress of the society demands that all people be given the opportunity to develop their talents and to champion their desires as long as they pose no threat to others.
- Marriage that based on equality and mutual respect will prosper
- Liberation of women will be useful in three major ways. This position is a pure utilitarian one. Thus,
  - Development of the individuals including women
  - Development of the society through the contributions of women in various fields
  - Happiness of women through essential autonomy granted to them and freedom from unhappiness of being always told of what to do.

## 2. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex (Deuxième Sexe)*, 1949.

Today, we freely discuss philosophical work on feminism presented by women. Earlier, many females were not admitted into the fold and ranks of philosophy simply for reason of gender. As such, their thoughts were not considered philosophical especially when they discuss female related issues. For examples, Simone de Beauvoir was naturally put 2<sup>nd</sup> to her life companion, Sartre. Mary Calkins, May Sinclair, Hilda Oakeley, etc. were denied PhD certificates on reasons of sexism.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of feminism owed its inspiration to the monumental 1949 publication of the French philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir titled *The Second Sex: Woman as Other* which served as the catalyst for the challenge of patriarchal *status quo* that favoured men's domination over women. Being conscientized of their conditions of their time, women expressed great sense of injustice and demanded for social, political, legal, educational and personal liberation to help them take control of their destiny. Her work targeted Plato's affirmation that sex is an accidental quality and that men and women are equally qualified to belong to the guardian class but the price of women's admittance into this privileged class is

that they be trained and live like men. Thus, “If women are to have the same duties as men, they must have the nurture and education... then women must be taught music and gymnastics and also the art of war, which they must practice like the men” (Plato, *The Republic*, bk. 2). By implication, only men and those who act like them are to be given favourable positions. *The Second Sex* is a critique of social, political, religious and cultural practices that classify women as inferior beings that should be ascribed inferior status. Her arguments for gender equality are based on existential (a living and practical philosophical thought through concrete problems and exploration of potential solutions) and phenomenological perspectives and they include:

- The unjust and immoral subordination of women on the basis of sex differences
- The reality of sexual differences is not accidental unless it is proven otherwise and concretely validated by experiences (cf. 1<sup>st</sup> premise of phenomenology).
- In other words, she did not accept the general idea that to be born with female genitalia is to be born a woman. Hence, “one is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman.”
- As a feminist phenomenologist, she examined the meanings of female body, experiences and the way cultures frame them and alienate them from their possibilities. Her reflections exposed social bias based on construction of femininity that formed feminist debate.
- For example, the assumption that women are of weaker sex was not built on any logical ground. Otherwise what criteria of strength are used? Is longevity not a sign of strength? What of women's virtue of resilience?
- The “primordial *mitsein*” was a liberatory tool that proclaimed such act of deprivation of what women can do an oppressive action.
- This experience of injustice (alienation of women from their embodied abilities) called for liberation.
- Women not being responsible for themselves by not making consequential choices is a bad faith and they are not pleased and fulfilled with such an alienated status as 'the Other.'
- Women's exploitation is an existential and a historical situation that is subject to change by the women themselves; not by appealing to men for freedom but by discovering their solidarity in order to reject bad faith and enjoy their freedom.

Simone opined that the myth of woman must be dismantled so to permit all other efforts of political, economic, social advances to yield lasting fruits. She sought liberation from two major chains of patriarchal oppression:

1. From the idea that to be independent, women must be like men (alienation from their sexuality).
2. From the unfavourable socialization through which they become free

Hence, two main prerequisites for women liberation include:

1. Women must favourably socialize to engage the world.
2. Women must be allowed to discover the unique ways through which their embodiment engages the world.

### **Feminism in Nigerian Context**

Feminism in Nigeria is an age-long issue; as old as the nation itself. Since its amalgamation, records have been kept demonstrating the struggles of Nigerian women in challenging acts of violence and discriminations against them. Just as in other countries of the world, there exist women movements in Nigeria that serve to address the issues of male dominance and gender inequality.

### **Historical Timeline of National Events**

Women's contribution to nation building can never be underestimated. Nigerian history recorded that women were the first to challenge the colonial masters. For examples:

- 1914- Ogidi palaver- The very year of amalgamation of Nigeria, there was significant protest against both British and Nigerian men for not including them in decision making.
- 1925- Nwaobiala Movement- Forceful rejection of colonial values that culminate into 1929 Aba women's riot- when Igbo market women protested against British taxation, even though dozens of them lost their lives.
- 1948-Abeokuta Women Union (AWU) protests led by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti against excessive tax collection that led the foundation of first national women organization.
- 1953- Federation of Nigerian Women's Society (FNWS)
- 1959- National council of Women's Societies NCWS
- 1983- Establishment of women league (WIN- Women in Nigeria) with a very clear agenda, objectives and ideology of Feminism.
- 2008 -WIN was replaced by Nigerian Feminist Forum (NFF) to end policies that favour discriminations against women in the country.

Today, in order to encourage peace, no explicit riots are staged but through non-confrontational ways, lobbying, advocacy, media relations, etc. various feminist movements and platforms are formed depending on the issues on ground. Such feminist platforms include:

- Stand to end rape
- Bring back our girls
- Also, through creative expressions such as poetry, dramas, arts and cultural displays, internet blogs, feminine writers such as Chimamanda Adichie, Buchi Emecheta, etc. challenge the gender inequality in the nation.

### **Philosophy Interrogates 21<sup>st</sup> Century Feminism in Nigeria**

21<sup>st</sup> century is a highly digital and information age; an era marked with accelerated technological advancement. As such women are challenged to acquire certain necessary skills peculiar to the century in order to move with the pace of demand in navigating through the challenges of life and excel. This is what Trilling and Fadel referred to as 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that primarily involve 12 abilities. They include learning and innovation skills of critical thinking, creative, collaborative and communicative abilities (4Cs), digital skills of information, media and technological literacy (IMT) as well as career and life skills of flexible, leadership, initiative, productive and social capacities to face the challenges of the time (FLIPS).

However, the relevance of feminism in our time also entails addressing the more complex matters arising from even the achievements of the feminist movement. Somehow feminism

has been endangered. In the face of feminism, our family also took a dive. Bits of dangerous alliance between career and motherhood continue to manifest. Some of our women who could not successfully combine their professional careers and motherhood have failed us. This has very devastating ecological consequences. For examples:

- Family issues– (destabilized family bonds, consequences on the children and the society at large, etc.)
- Sexual freedom brought about sexual harassment and obvious moral decadence. Never is trafficking as in our time.

### **Conclusion: Feminism in Nigeria: So Far, How Far?**

As philosophy interrogates feminism in Nigerian society, it discovers that it has accomplished a good deal of its goal. No doubt, feminism has helped to achieve much especially with regard to women empowerment and consequent contributions to development at various spheres.

However, Nigerian politics is one of the grey areas of gender issue. Female representation in public affairs is still poor. Political participation of women in leadership is also very much under-represented. On the other side, the effects of radical emphasis on freedom of women especially with regard to participation in politics are stark-glaring. Currently, in the nation, due to economic meltdown and other factors, divorce and consequent single parenting is on the steep increase and it has devastating effects on our children. They are besieged with untold distractions, restlessness and moral decadence, etc.

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